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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”

Statement submitted by American Association of University Women, Anglican Consultative Council, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership Conference, Girls Learn International, Grail, International Council of Jewish Women, International Federation for Home Economics, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Movement for Fraternal Union among Races and Peoples, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, League of Women Voters of the United States, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women’s Association, Passionists International, Plan International, Salesian Missions, Salvation Army, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, To Love Children Educational Foundation International, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, VIVAT International and World Union for Progressive Judaism, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

Statement

Promises made

In 2008, in the agreed conclusions from its fifty-second session, the Commission on the Status of Women reaffirmed the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, including section L entitled “The girl child”, whereby Governments made commitments to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, publicly acknowledged that the advancement of women is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls and highlighted the importance of policies and strategies to improve the situation of those in rural areas. The Commission also identified poverty eradication as the greatest global challenge facing the world and stressed that combating the growing feminization of poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals requires investing sufficient resources for gender equality and empowerment.

Equal access, for rural girls and women, to education and health services, gainful employment, decision-making and productive resources, including land, capital, credit and technology were also emphasized in the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. In that document, the Assembly noted the large number of rural women working in the informal economy, with low levels of income, little job and social security and discriminatory land and inheritance rights. The Assembly called upon Governments to incorporate a gender perspective into the design, development, adoption and execution of all policies and budgetary processes to support gender equality and empowerment.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, including their Optional Protocols, are designed to protect the human rights of girls. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which focuses on rural women and girls, calls on States parties to ensure that women and girls have the same rights as men and boys.

The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women offers a unique opportunity for Member States to evaluate the implementation of the agreed conclusions from the fifty-second session and examine the empowerment of rural girls and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. The Working Group on the Girl Child encourages the Commission to review progress, provide policy guidance and ensure the empowerment of all girls, including those in rural and urban areas, in order to ensure the full enjoyment of their human rights.

Promises broken

Despite decades of treaties, laws, resolutions, statements, meetings and promises, the well-being of girls still lags behind that of boys. Research indicates that girls begin life from a position of disadvantage, which continues throughout their lifespan. In addition, data in a United Nations Children’s Fund report of 2011 indicate that inequalities in access to opportunities, resources and services, including education, health and protection, become significantly greater as girls approach adolescence. Research also indicates that the situation is particularly dire for girls in rural areas, who are routinely denied the resources that they need to

break the poverty cycle as a result of discriminatory cultural practices, property and inheritance laws and unequal access to technology and services. As noted by the General Assembly in 2011, for example, the rural environment is one of extreme poverty. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the 1.4 billion extremely poor (defined as those living on less than \$1.25 per day), in the developing world, live in rural areas.

Data provided by the World Health Organization in 2011 indicate that the cultural preference for sons, based on prevailing beliefs that boys bring more prestige or wealth to a family than girls, has resulted in over 100 million missing girls, as a result of female feticide, infanticide, malnutrition and neglect. In addition, data from the United Nations Children's Fund, also from 2011, indicate that only 50 per cent of children under 5 living in the developing world were registered at birth, with significant differences between children in rural and urban areas. A number of empirical studies indicate that rural girls are more likely than their urban peers to manifest delayed growth and development and to show evidence of anaemia or deficiencies in iron and vitamin D. In some countries, including Ghana, Mali and Senegal, rates of anaemia among adolescent girls (aged between 15 and 19) exceed 60 per cent. Furthermore, girls face significant barriers to accessing health care.

As a consequence of prevailing gender roles and their associated obligations, commitments and expectations, many girls' educational, social and economic opportunities are hampered. Girls, for example, are often obliged to devote an unequal share of time to unpaid personal care work (caring for children, the sick or the elderly) and care-related activities (fetching water and firewood, processing and preparation of food, cleaning and washing). And despite the fact that education yields many long-term benefits, including a trend towards marriage at a later age and greater opportunities to develop job skills, numerous studies have found that girls are more likely than boys to be denied their human right to basic literacy and education, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. The situation is worse for members of ethnic or racial minorities and girls who live in poverty or in rural areas. Structural barriers in rural areas include poor electricity supply, distance (e.g., living in mountain areas with no transportation) and the danger of walking home after dark, and girls' responsibilities to help their families earn a living constitute a further impediment. In one study, it was found that girls in rural areas were less likely than their urban peers to attend secondary school (66 per cent versus 84 per cent), and that girls in rural areas were also less likely to complete secondary school compared with their male peers (43 per cent versus 58 per cent).

Some girls are forced into marriage at or before the onset of puberty, the consequences of which may include ending their education; limiting their freedom; and increasing their risk of experiencing domestic violence, adverse pregnancy outcomes and HIV infection. In the poorest regions of the world, most of which are rural, 35 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18; the figure is estimated at 45 per cent in southern central Asia, 40 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 25 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. In some countries, including Bangladesh, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Niger, more than 60 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18. Research has documented that girls in rural areas experience higher rates of maternal mortality, obstetric fistula and violence, while their access to services, law enforcement and legal protection remains limited or non-existent.

The rural environment is also characterized by limited access to decent work, widespread unemployment, poor quality jobs, low pay, inadequate labour rights,

weak social protection and the lack of representation. In 2009, a report by the International Labour Organization found that these structural barriers were exacerbated for girls, owing to their lack of education and training, inadequate transportation and the constraints arising from unequal obligations as regards care and household responsibilities. Consequently, rural girls are employed in more precarious forms of informal employment, including domestic work, where they face numerous health risks, including abuse by both the women and men of the household. Girls in rural areas, and particularly those from ethnic minority areas, are particularly vulnerable to being recruited to work far from home, with false promises of decent and legitimate work, and subsequently being trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. At least 1.8 million children are exploited in commercial sex or pornography worldwide, the vast majority of them being girls.

Recommendations

To improve the condition of girls in rural areas, we urge Member States to:

1. Promote a human rights-based approach to gender equality

Support is required for the implementation of all existing commitments, most notably the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (in particular its article 14 on rural women and girls), and the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in particular section L. We strongly support the development of a joint general resolution or comment on harmful practices affecting girls to help fulfil obligations under both Conventions and ongoing monitoring on the implementation of those treaties.

2. Support economic empowerment via equal access to economic resources

The fulfilment of their human rights is a precondition for girls to make a successful transition into adulthood and to become empowered both economically and socially. Barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights persist in practice, including gender stereotypes, patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory practices within families, communities and institutions, and in law, including as regards land, property and inheritance rights, and must be removed with urgency. Legislative and administrative reforms must promote the economic empowerment of girls through policies, strategies and programmes that ensure equal access to education at all levels; physical and mental health services; employment opportunities and economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property; credit; natural resources and technology. Positive employment opportunities for girls in rural areas must be expanded.

3. Intensify efforts to reduce poverty and economic inequality

Combating the feminization of poverty requires investing sufficient resources for gender equality and the empowerment of girls, taking into account the diversity of needs between those in urban and rural areas. Promoting gender equality and empowerment within rural communities helps to reduce poverty, hunger, disease, environmental degradation and violence. We urge greater investment in rural development and agriculture, labour-saving technology and clean and renewable energy in rural communities.

4. Invest in quality education and training

Investment in quality education and training in rural areas, including vocational and literacy training, is a central intervention with strong multiplier effects. Comprehensive national education strategies must include long-term funding that ensures adequate infrastructure for education and prioritizes the education of girls in all development plans and poverty reduction plans.

5. Improve data collection and analysis

Effective policies and programmes for the empowerment of girls and rural development will require strengthening countries' capacity to collect and analyse data that are disaggregated by sex and age, and on the basis of rural and urban populations. Examples of good practices and lessons learned in promoting gender equality and girls' empowerment in rural areas should be compiled and shared, with a view to replicating and scaling up successes.

6. Launch public campaigns to create awareness

Public campaigns are vital in order to eliminate discrimination based on a notion of inferiority of girls, in both the public and private spheres, and to support positive attitudes and behaviours that encourage girls' full participation in all areas of life. Campaigns must make use of the media and address the active role of men and boys by establishing gender equality and emphasizing the societal benefits, for all, of empowering girls. Studies also indicate that gender biases and stereotypes are influenced by parents, school and the media and reinforced by the peer group.
